



Touching Ground, Transcending Form: The Grounding of the Elements in Bhūmisparśa-Mudrā

The deeper meaning of the lowered right hand (bhūmisparśa-mudrā)

In its most familiar sense, the lowered right hand of Gautama Buddha in bhūmisparśa-mudrā is the earth-witness gesture: the Buddha calls the earth to bear witness to his awakening and his victory over Māra.

However, in a tantric and yogic reading, the gesture carries a deeper inner meaning.

The five fingers as the five elements

The five digits of the right hand may be understood as representing the five elements:

Thumb = space (ākāśa)

Index = air (vāyu)

Middle = fire (tejas)

Ring = water (ap)

Little = earth (pṛthvī)

In this way, the hand itself becomes a map of the elemental body.

Why the hand is lowered

When the Buddha lowers his hand to the ground, this can be read as symbolising:

the withdrawal of the five elements from embodied form and liberation from their conditioned structure.

This interpretation is supported by yogic sources such as the Sekoddeśaḥ (vv. 46–53), which describes the elements as located within the subtle body and progressively drawn together and withdrawn through the central channel.

Read verses 46 through to 53 of the sekoddeśaḥ:

<https://archive.org/details/english-translation-of-the-sekoddesah-first-draft/page/n13/mode/iup>

Likewise, the Viveka Mārtaṇḍa (vv. 162–164) presents five distinct dhāraṇās (concentrative procedures), each associated with one of the elements, through which the yogin gains mastery over them.

Read verses 162 through to 164, especially footnotes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 of verse 163:

<https://archive.org/details/viveka-martanda/page/n59/mode/iup>

What the gesture expresses

Seen in this light, the lowered right hand is not only a historical gesture, but a yogic seal:

The five fingers = the five elements

Their downward extension = their complete mastery and release of ¹

The contact with the earth = freedom from elemental embodiment

1. The gesture suggests a movement from holding to release.

A concise formulation

In a tantric interpretation, the five lowered fingers of the Buddha's right hand symbolise the five elements, and their extension to the earth expresses the yogic withdrawal of these elements and the breaking free from conditioned, elemental form.

This reading does not replace the traditional “earth-witness” meaning, but deepens it: the earth is not only witness to awakening, but also the final ground upon which the elements are mastered, transcended, and left behind. ²

2. Returned to the Earth by the वाग्गुह्य (vāgguhya), “secret of speech”.

The five lowered fingers represent the withdrawal from elemental embodiment and the breaking free from elemental form, together with the yogic method ³ by which that liberation is achieved (thwarting the hordes of Māra).

3. The Ascent of Śakti through Body, Speech, and Mind.

In the tantric body of the adept, the awakened śakti moves as an ascending current through body, speech, and mind. Within the body, she rises through the central channel from the lower centre, passing through navel, heart, throat, and

forehead, gathering and refining the elements as she ascends. In speech, this same current becomes vāyu, empowered as breath and articulated sound, issuing forth like a roaring wind from the mouth as it reaches the higher centres. In mind, the ascent permeates the cerebral centre and then pierces above the skull as the līṅga of energy, expressing abhiṣeka, the yogic anointing that precedes the illumination of samādhī.

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